

NO MORE MEDIA ROBOTS

Does media training help PROs deal more effectively with the press, or does it turn friendly, helpful interviewees into corporate zombies? **Helen Gregory** investigates



REX FEATURES

What is the point in being a super-efficient PR officer if your spokespeople are so ill-prepared or indiscreet during an interview that the journalist gets a great story but you end up with a crisis?

It is just this scenario that has pushed media training up the agenda to give floundering spokespeople the confidence to deal with demanding journalists and avoid amateurish cock-ups.

But with increased training has come journalists' biggest gripe – that interviewees who go through it come out thinking reporters are only there to trip them up. Worse still is that the training, rather than providing the skills to open up, is often like a sausage factory where nice, friendly people get turned into dull, corporate robots, devoid of personality, who think jargon and soundbites make for good copy.

The reality is that most journalists aren't looking for the next Watergate – just someone with a bit of personality and a few good quotes.

While most PR agencies and media training companies all insist that their brand of media training is useful and realistic, journalists are increasingly frustrated with the growing army of corporate zombies.

Without doubt, scaremongering still exists. Some spokespeople seem to have had the fear of God put into them, says Ed Bedington, associate editor of *Fresh Produce Journal*. 'Training may be intended to help these people deal more effectively with the press, but in my experience it tends to have a more negative effect, with people either being too frightened to talk, or too glib and completely failing to provide any information of worth whatsoever.'

Paint a bleak picture

Some of this blame can arguably be put at the door of media trainers who, possibly keen to gain clients, often paint a darker picture of non-trained people. The sales blurb on Four Degrees West's website reads: 'Journalists – whether they are local paper reporters or national TV correspondents – can effectively close you down with a negative story. Remember Gerald Ratner?'

Will Hardie, training director at Pinnacle PR, believes there is a general climate of fear about the potential damage the media can do. He says: 'Clients have realised the power of the media but are trying too hard to leverage them in the direction they want without understanding what media want.'

The trouble is, this won't get you very far. Simon Mowbray, news editor of *The Grocer* magazine, says you can tell

when many have been through media training because he or she has been taught how to speak to a journalist for an hour without saying anything very interesting. 'Smaller companies are usually the only ones with anything interesting to say and the only ones willing to stick their heads above the parapet.'

Hardie, a former Reuters journalist, believes poor interviews are sometimes the result of a spokesperson not understanding what a journalist will or will not use.

Poor preparation

James Tutt, director at Inferno Communications, says defensiveness does not serve anyone's interests and that you need to be wary of using a 'default' setting for interviews. However, he defends media training, and believes that just reading from the script can be the result of a company's internal culture, which is what the training tries to reverse. 'Poorly prepared spokespeople can give bad interviews. They don't read the media, or trade press, which makes it difficult to understand the kind of interview they need to give,' he says.

Most media trainers will insist they address this by having journalists on board, ready to point out the realities profession and able to give first-hand accounts of the kind of copy that they and their colleagues want, backed up by mock interviews.

'Journalists need something new or interesting and if they don't get it, they might resort to bad news,' explains Jane Keate, Text 100 senior consultant. 'Journalists use tricks that we teach clients about and will give them a really difficult interview; as long as journalists are fed a story that's interesting, they won't dig around in other areas.'

Text 100's AgendaMap training methodology addresses how to talk about areas of sensitivity for major corporations, while also giving journalists something of interest. 'We teach people how to say things in interesting ways – using metaphors for their areas of interest, such as golf,' says Keate.

Hardie tells clients that having soundbites is crucial, and often asks the internal PR department to come along to the training. He says feedback is important and, as part of Pinnacle's training, produces articles and broadcasts from mock interviews to show clients how stories are written, and to try and allay their fears.

Context is also important, argues Tutt. 'Putting your points into a broader context and drawing a link between what you want to talk about and what

JOURNALIST TURNED TRAINER



'Companies need to understand the pressure that journalists are under – it's their job to ferret out stories – while journalists need to understand the pressure that companies are under.' So says Tom Maddocks, a former reporter for *The Money Programme*, whose company Media Training Associates fills clients' spokespeople in on what drives journalists mad and what pushes their buttons.

Tom Maddocks He encourages clients to use concrete examples to convey points, rather than just being theoretical. 'Journalists hate companies that seek to give the impression that everything they do is perfect. Clients should be more open about the challenges to their business – if you admit mistakes, people think you're human, which is a good thing,' advises Maddocks, who has worked with clients including the World Gold Council.

Maddocks says it is important not to become robotic when dealing with the media. 'Too many people spend time thinking about what they can't say, and not enough on what they can. If you're not really going to say anything – it's not worth doing the interview.'

the audience cares about is crucial. An interview should be a conversation and a meeting of agendas.'

Training has helped Shelley Robertson, international marketing manager for financial services provider Skandia Life, realise that she has to talk about what journalists are going to be interested in and to understand that most in the financial services sector are not interested in uncovering scandals. This

means she has the confidence to go off the record with those she has a good relationship with, but adds that if someone was trying to probe a particularly contentious issue, she would stick to the corporate script.

'Most journalists want to be educated about a subject and if I don't know something, I'll be honest and try and find out for them,' she says.

But doing interviews is a skill and

THE TRAINED



Colin Simm

The Land Registry has evolved from a fairly insular government body into a more public-facing organisation, which prompted bosses there to seek out some training to hone their interview skills.

'We're in the public eye more these days and expect to be questioned about it,' explains marketing and communications director Colin Simm, who has undergone media training on how to speak to the press. 'We also want to present a positive image.'

Simm went through a series of mock print and broadcast interviews with colleagues, followed by an analysis of how he performed, and says he learned two important things: preparation and presentation. 'The training taught me to think about what we were most likely to be asked about, as well as how to sit and where to look. It also made me realise that interviews are a chance to get your points across, rather than defending your position.'

He doesn't believe the training taught him how to be evasive: 'It's meant that not only do I answer a question, but I can also add a positive view.'

while some people are naturals, not everyone is cut out for it – and companies need to pick the best people for the job. Tutt adds: 'Sometimes people from a sales background find it particularly difficult to adapt – they see an interview as a sales opportunity.'

Nicole Lander, former Woolworths head of corporate affairs, is one of those naturals and is a veteran of the *Today* programme and *Channel 4*

News, so she is obviously an interesting interviewee. Is she a corporate robot? She admits that she sometimes uses humour to deflect questions, but at least it still makes for good copy.

'I won't agree to do an interview unless I've got the authority,' she says. 'You need to be interesting or there's no point. It's about confidence and knowing your subject matter. You shouldn't be scared to stand up for yourself.' ■